

*CHILDREN OF RED PAINT

Sara Mehdinia fiction

S-146 called himself Stanley, but only in his neural circuitry. Externally, he was a robot made to kill. Internally, he was an artist.

There was an art to killing, Stanley told himself as he glanced out the window of the chopper. It failed to make him feel better. The overseer caught his movement, and Stanley whipped his head forward so he looked like the rest of the polished robots in the cabin. T-199, sitting next to him, gave him a subtle nudge with her elbow. Right. He had to be more careful.

Stanley found himself staring right into the dulled, red eyes of Z-977, who was sitting opposite him against the other wall of the helicopter. The helicopter tilted, and the overseer's laser gun fell off his lap and slid across the floor. The overseer cursed and reached for it. In that moment, Z-977 flashed his eyes a bright, aggressive red, directed at Stanley.

Stanley kept his expression neutral. The overseer righted himself, and Z-977 returned to obscurity.

There was a bump, and the mighty roar of the helicopter blades slowly winded down. Stanley resisted the urge to look out the

window. He already knew where they were. Neersa: what remained of Palestine after the Global War. A den for the rising insurrection against the United Territories.

The overseer stood, then all the robots stood in perfect unison. Each robot was seven feet tall, made of gleaming titanium alloy, human in shape but with aerodynamic, insect-like heads. Sheathed in their forearms and chest were multitudes of weapons, capable of shearing through humans like butter.

The back of the helicopter opened, and the robots marched out into the clouds of dust in two straight lines. The helicopter door closed, and it lifted off into the bright blue sky, leaving the robots and their human overseer in the hot Neersa desert.

The robots stood perfectly poised, each knowing the assignment. The programming had been sent through neural link an hour before they boarded the helicopter.

In the distance, perhaps a mile away, stood a front of trees. Stanley could see the heat signatures of bodies, crouched low, lying in wait in the undergrowth. The rebels, he thought with despair. Run! Run far away, as fast as your

human legs can take you. But nevertheless, all the robots took one step forward, and another, and Stanley was one of them.

The robots broke into a run. They moved into a triangular formation, like a flock of birds migrating. Human shouts filled the air. The robots whirred in amusement, and then the Neersans exploded out of the trees and were upon them.

The robots moved in a dance of silver. Bullets ricocheted harmlessly off the robots' hides. Blades sliced through fleshy limbs easily. Crimson splattered and sunk into the hot desert sand. Stanley identified the enemy, gutted the enemy, moved onto the next. To his right was Z-977. His preferred method of slaughter was beheading, which he did now with a precision that bordered boredom. But no one could look at Z-977 and call him bored; no. Z-977 was having the time of his life.

Stanley was not. After the fortieth Neersan, he stopped to recalibrate his sensors. During this time, he observed his brethren moving forward through the bodies and engaging with more gunmen. Sunlight glinted off their skin and turned them into shining demons. Even gentle T-199 plunged a bladed hand deep above the diaphragm of a dark-skinned, bearded man in a combat suit. He dropped his weapon and coughed up blood. She slung his body off her

hand easily and dashed forward. She was beautiful even then.

Something nudged Stanley's foot. He looked down to see the head of a man. The eyes were staring forward, up at Stanley, the jaw in a horrible grimace. Freckles dotted his cheeks and blood soaked his beard. A bit of his spinal cord was visible. Stanley, sickened, looked away.

Was his purpose really just to war?

Stanley jogged forward to rejoin with the rest of the robots, who were now picking their way through the tree line, looking for stragglers. The battle was over quickly, as they all were.

Stanley slowed as he entered the shade. The sand was now cool under his feet. He picked up a stick off the ground, and if he concentrated hard enough, his imagination sequencing could pretend it was a paintbrush . . .

"S-146?" barked the overseer's voice. Stanley dropped it and moved further into the trees. He didn't see any heat signatures. A few hundred meters away, he heard a shrill scream, then a wet sound. He shuddered and moved to the right, fanning out as he was supposed to. But could the overseer tell if Stanley was actually paying attention? No. He was a dunce, like most humans.

Stanley treaded carefully through the undergrowth. His

imagination whirred, and suddenly he could almost believe he was no longer a war machine, but an explorer of a far-away land, here to make peace, not break it.

A bird called far away.

The sun dappled the forest floor. Stanley hid his bloodstained hands behind his back—the sight of them was ruining the immersion—but couldn't wipe off the bloodstains on his chestplate. Stanley, bravely venturing through the unknown, a botanical illustrator, skilled in quill and paint--

A high-pitched whistle pierced the air, too high for the human ear to hear. The all-clear. Stanley turned to go back towards the tree line.

A large heat signature pulsed at the corner of his eye.

Stanley clicked and whirred as he slowly turned to look at it. It hunkered under a bush, too small to be an adult human. His hand reconstructed into a blade in less than a second. He walked until he was towering over the bush, then kicked the bush aside.

A Neersan child. A girl, no older than seven or eight. She cowered in the dirt, her dark hair cropped close to her head, clutching a ragged stuffed monkey. An enemy, by all standards.

She spoke, and it translated immediately. "Where's my dad?" Her voice wavered.

She was not supposed to be here. Stanley's mind spun as he tried to make sense of it. They

never encountered children on the warfront. Perhaps she had followed her father to the forest from their encampment, or her father was simply stupid in the head. The orders were to kill any Neersans they encountered.

The blood on Stanley's blade could have well been from her father. "He's not here," said Stanley flatly, in a robot tone she would have expected. He raised his bladed arm, and she shrank away. The order was to kill her, but something in her eyes reminded Stanley of the same curiosity he had. Where was her mother? She wasn't an orphan yet, he surmised. And he was tired of killing.

He knelt down and switched out his blade for his regular hand. Her eyes widened and fear shone through her large, dark eyes.

"Go back home," he said in her native tongue, quietly, very quietly. His fellow robots had keen senses of hearing. "Do you understand me? Go home."

She nodded her tear-streaked face. He stood up, and she scrambled to her feet. Then her eyes shifted to something over his shoulder, something in the distance. The color drained from her face.

Stanley turned around. There, silhouetted against a distant tree, stood Z-977, fresh from the slaughter. He was doused head to toe in blood, and bits of flesh and bone were caught in between the blades studding up his arm.

His insect-like face returned the child's gaze, and the metal frills that normally lay flat against his skull flared out, like a komodo dragon. He looked vaguely amused at the sight of Stanley and the child as he picked his way through the undergrowth to stand next to them. He had heard their entire encounter.

"S-146, disobeying orders?" Z-977 had never been a tactful one.

Stanley stayed silent. The girl was frozen in fear, not understanding his English words.

"She's the enemy. Go on."

Stanley looked back towards the girl. He felt nausea, then dread. She was too young. Her presence here was an accident. He took a tentative step towards her, then looked back at Z-977 again.

Z-977 returned his stare venomously and nodded. Stanley felt a sudden rush of hatred for him, and it made him brash. He fell to his knees in front of the girl, who let out a squeal. Stanley raised his unarmed hands up into the air in a gesture of submission.

"I won't do it," he said, and a feeling of thrill rushed through him. Let Z-977 argue with him; he didn't care. This was the right thing to do.

Z-977 sighed. A boot planted against the side of Stanley's head and sent him sprawling to the side with explosive force. Stanley lifted his head from the dirt, sensors scrambling to recalibrate, just in time to see Z-977 raise his blade.

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"They tell me you disobeyed orders," said Master. He was sitting in his favorite chair beside the fireplace. More grey streaked his beard since the last time Stanley had returned home from deployment. The creases in his face were deeper and displeased.

Stanley stood next to the coffee table in front of him, posture awkward under his glare.

"They wanted me to kill a child," said Stanley stiffly. To humans, all robots sounded stiff, but Master would be able to tell the difference. "I refused."

"The child was included in the order," said Master. "All Neersans. It was a Neersan, was it not? A small one, no less, but it was ripe for radicalization. You would have killed it in battle in a few years anyway." A request for communication vibrated the phone-console around his wrist. He waved the hologram away. "A disobedient robot is a dangerous one, Stanley."

"The child shouldn't have been there," said Stanley. A wave of anger rolled through him. "And I spent my early years guarding your children."

"And now the children are all grown up, and fighting on the warfront, like how you have grown up and left. Stella is married away. Hans is a cadet. You cannot let the past interfere with your current duties, which are to serve the United Territories completely and absolutely."

“Pull me from service, then,” said Stanley.

Silence. Stanley regretted saying it.

“Is that really what you want?” said Master.

Stanley considered the question. “I want to paint,” he said.

A surprised silence followed.

“Did Stella implant you with an imagination module?” asked Master.

Yes, when she was a teenager, thought Stanley. The faulty module clicked. “No.”

“Then stop acting foolish.”

“I’ll downgrade my request. A tube of red paint and a brush?”

“Red paint?” Master was bemused. “What for?”

Stanley thought of the images of war he couldn’t shake from his visual processors, needed to find a way to express and discard. “It’s my favorite color,” he said.

Master seemed to consider it for a moment. He smiled. “No.”

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Back on the helicopter. Back with the squadron, who knew by now why he had taken a short leave of absence and found it hilarious.

“It’s just a kid,” jeered Z-977 when Stanley had first boarded. “What, she was too strong for you? Overpowered you?” The other robots chattered, their way of laughing. Stanley’s face remained impassive.

“Lay off,” said T-199 as they settled into their seats and strapped in. “It was just a malfunction. Right, S-146?”

“Someone’s got a preference,” said Z-977, and another robot whistled.

T-199’s frills flared in anger. “Let’s just be nice to each other,” she snapped.

The robots had rapport, the ability to tease and impose and understand social nuance. The military had programmed them with limited human behavior, believing that the human touch made the robots more capable of learning and interacting in war. If humans weren’t on the front lines, the next best thing was humanlike.

Their mimicry of humans was shallow, though. Stanley doubted the others thought about much more than the next mission. And they definitely didn’t experience his breadth of feeling.

Though sometimes Stanley thought T-199 was the most like him, the most flawed. He liked her. She was beautiful, but he knew that whatever appreciation he felt towards her didn’t come close to the human approximation. He wasn’t encoded to love. It was, he suspected, his malfunctioning imagination module that allowed him to feel this affection for her. Stella, who had always encouraged him to feel feelings, would have been thrilled. But then he remembered she was married away to some faceless aristocrat and

whatever positive emotion he was feeling vanished.

The helicopter landed. The robots trooped out, like they had a hundred times before. T-199 stood next to him, long-legged, like they were all long-legged, slim, like they were all slim, but somehow to Stanley she looked markedly different from the rest.

She turned to look at him shrewdly. “What?” she said. He shrugged.

They ran over the dunes. Today they were exterminating a nest of Neersan rebels. This nest was underground, and aerial footage showed heavy artillery surrounding its mouth. The higher-ups considered drill bombs from above, but they wanted to investigate the inside, so Stanley’s squadron was dispatched.

Wind whipped the tops of the dunes and threatened to topple the group of robots, who were sprinting without signs of exertion. Stanley looked next to him at T-199. She loped in easy strides, efficient, graceful. Stanley was about to tell her something sappy and un-robot-like when the air exploded around them.

Sand mushroomed into the air and clogged his visual sensors. He hit the ground. Around him the robots shrilled in surprise and anger.

“Sentries,” yelled someone. Stanley rolled and the ground next to him exploded. Sentries? Those had to be military grade. Who was

supplying the Neersans?

He had these thoughts in the millisecond before he rolled again. A sentry narrowly missed him. He launched to the side and regained balance on his feet.

He turned tail and fled to regroup. Around him he saw his brethren with the same idea. The scream of artillery hit the air and one of Stanley’s comrades fell to the ground.

A sensor pinged in the corner of Stanley’s vision. His left hand dangled uselessly beside him. His feet pounded against the sand. An alarm blared in his head and he dove sideways.

The ground shook, and everything went dark. Stanley’s hearing module worked frantically to minimize the sound input. Then the smoke cleared, and Stanley saw the sentry who shot at him, a dark blip on a faraway dune. Stanley didn’t move a single gear.

It swiveled towards the robot nearest to Stanley. T-199—Sensors screamed at Stanley to stay still. He sprung upward and dashed towards her.

“T-199, run,” he tried to say, but his arm wasn’t the only thing that was damaged, and T-199 was always too overconfident in battle, and she was focused on the wrong sentry, couldn’t she see—

One stride, two strides, three. Stanley launched himself towards her. Steel screeched against steel. Limbs tangled around each other, and T-199 cried out in

surprise.

Bullets streamed over them. Alarms cluttered Stanley's visual processor, overlapping and pulsing and angry, angry, until he could hardly see. He felt T-199 struggle to right herself from under him.

MANUAL OVERRIDE INITIATED, read the largest alarm, center in his screen, the deepest red. The other alarms faded into the background as Stanley processed this with horror. The overseer had seen what he had just done. And hadn't Stanley known that it was a bad idea? That robots didn't perform self-sacrifice for each other—

A strong pair of arms pressed against Stanley's chestplate and lifted him up a few inches. T-199 rolled out from under him and crouched in the sand, her frills extended in hostility. "What—" she spat, "were you thinking? S-146, you idiot—"

Stanley's heart sank. Deep down, all T-199 cared about was the mission.

A new red notification blared in the center of Stanley's vision. Fear sliced through him.

SHUTDOWN IN FIVE, FOUR, THREE, TWO, ONE—

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"I'm disappointed in you," said Master.

They were in the living room again, the second time in a week. Master was staring out the window, hands clenched together behind his back.

Stanley stood next to him, in front of the view of Master's sprawling estate, but Stanley was staring at his left hand. Master had paid to replace it, and now it was too shiny, untested by war. It didn't look like it belonged.

A request for communication rang from Master's phone console. Stanley recognized the name, a high-ranking military official. Master let it ring throughout the silent room.

"This looks bad for me," said Master. "If I can't control an unruly robot . . ."

"T-199 is valuable," said Stanley. "To lose her would be a mistake."

"That robot is no more valuable than any other robot, including you," said Master. He turned his gaze upon Stanley's face now, and even though Stanley was much taller than Master, it still made Stanley feel small. "I only keep you around because Stella would never forgive me if I sent you to the junkyard. And don't you think, S-146, that it's irrational to put two robots in danger instead of one? Because that's exactly what you did."

"We're both safe now," said Stanley.

A silence followed.

"What am I to do with you?" asked Master. He raised a hand to his brow and closed his eyes. Stanley noticed how old Master looked now. It scared him.

Master opened his eyes.

“Answer me, S-146.”

“I want to be an artist,”
said Stanley.

Master’s face creased with a deep emotion Stanley couldn’t recognize, then it was gone.

“An artist? Is this what you really want?”

“I was not made for war,”
said Stanley.

Master sighed. “I suppose not.”

Stanley had been anticipating punishment, not aghast agreement. “Will I have my own easel? Paint?”

“I will commission you an easel,” said Master. “I’ll send a message to your overseer. You are to be retired from the warfront.”

Joy rose up inside Stanley, but punctuated with sadness that had only just occurred to him. He wouldn’t even be able to say goodbye to T-199. She was alright with the warfront, though, content to kill, as Stanley should have been. She would be fine, better, even, without him.

Stanley’s imagination processor whirred and clicked. Stanley was overcome with gratitude.

“Thank you,” said Stanley.

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The easel took a week to arrive. During that time, Master was rarely seen around the house. He was off doing diplomatic services, S-146 heard in passing from two maids, but no one had bothered to notify him directly.

Why would anyone inform the robot?

S-146 spent his time wandering the house at night. He could tell he scared the human staffers during the day, a seven-foot tall, dented killing machine blundering around; more used to desert dunes than hardwood floors. So he did his exploring at night, visiting the dozens of galleries, living rooms, guest bedrooms, and somehow always finding himself back in Stella’s old room.

The room had been transformed from a child’s bedroom to a guest bedroom. The pink curtains were replaced with brown ones, Stella’s drawings ripped off the wall and replaced with Rembrandts and Basquiats. It was on the floor of Stella’s old room that S-146 kneeled and cried, or at least, he tried to. He could imagine his visual processor filling with tears, tears that would slide down his face and cleanse the bloodstains off his breastplate; but if you walked into that room, all you would see was a robot hunched on the ground, moonlight gleaming off his insectine head.

Master returned to the house on a busy Monday evening. The household staffers moved in a flurry around him, taking off his coat, barking orders at each other, whisking away his luggage and bringing him a glass of his favorite wine. In less than an hour, the house was quiet again, but buzzing with tense energy, as it always did

when Master was home.

Master sat in his favorite armchair again, in the lavish main living room that Stanley knew so well. His glass was half-drained, and next to him was a large rectangular shape hidden away under a red drape.

Stanley had been summoned from Stella's old room. They had both sat in silence as Master drank his wine and regarded Stanley with a smile. Finally, Master broke the silence.

"I wager you're wondering what's under that cloth," said Master. He swirled his wine around in his glass. A drop of it breached the side of the glass and landed on Master's white shirt, staining it a deep red. Master didn't seem to notice.

"It seems obvious," said Stanley.

"Oh yes, it is," said Master. "Come closer."

Stanley stood up from his chair and lumbered towards the easel. It was too large for a human, scaled exactly correct for a robot of Stanley's size. Stanley's right hand reached forward and grasped a handful of the slippery cloth. He went to tug and hesitated.

"Go on," said Master. "It's your present."

Joy rose inside Stanley once more. He yanked the cloth backwards. It slithered out of his open hand and onto the floor.

The easel was long-legged, like they were all long-legged, slim,

like they were all slim. It gleamed of metal bloodstained one too many times. Mounted on it was a blank white canvas and a plain metal brush with no paint.

No life anymore.

T-199.

Master watched Stanley with narrowed eyes over his glass of wine. He began to laugh, a harsh, ugly sound. He slapped a fist against his thigh and wheezed.

"And you thought you weren't leaving deployment without punishment!"

Stanley turned towards Master. His left hand morphed from a shiny, untested slender thing to a long blade. Alarms began to blare in his vision. Stanley's imagination module hissed and turned, and the alarms were silenced.

Master fumbled with his drink. It slipped out of his fingers and spilled out onto the carpet. Master's hands scrambled against the armrests of his favorite chair, and fear pooled into his eyes as Stanley stepped closer.

"Stanley, what are you doing?" asked Master. The color drained from his face. His hand reached for the gun at his side but Stanley's right hand shot out and clamped down around his wrist. Master let out a strangled groan.

For once, Stanley was calm about what he was about to do. Externally, he was a robot made to kill.

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Stanley dipped his brush into the color red. He tested it against the edge of his blade a few times, tapping off the excess like he had seen the human artists do, and pressed the bristles against the canvas. A shaky line bloomed under his touch.

The room was a mess. Everything was red. The walls, the floor, the carpeting, the furniture.

If Stanley could cry, he would have. Instead, he was standing in front of his new easel, brush in one hand, blade unsheathed as the other.

Stanley dipped his brush into the red again and drew another shaky line. He stopped for a moment to take inventory of his internal systems. He needed to recalibrate.

“Sir?” came the shy voice from the other side of the door. “Your bath is drawn. Sir?”

Stanley remembered he had forgotten to lock the door. In an instant, the easel was in his hands, and he was next to the window. His bladed hand pressed against the bulletproof glass. A mixture of emotions whirled through his head—fear, hatred, longing. The despair of T-199’s fate. The primal need to escape.

Stanley raised his arm and swung down. Glass shattered.

It was a shame all this paint had to go to waste. After all, internally, he was an artist.